

Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Stoddert, February 18, 1809, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

TO BENJAMIN STODDERT J. MSS.

Washington, February 18, 1809.

Sir, —Your favor of January 25th had been duly received, and I was waiting in the hope I might find a moment of less pressure in which I might answer it somewhat in detail, when that of the 14th inst. came to hand. Finding that, instead of any relaxation of business, it crowds more on me as I approach my departure, I can only indulge myself in a very brief reply. As to the rights of the United States as a neutral power, our opinions are very different, mine being that when two nations go to war, it does not abridge the rights of neutral nations but in the two articles of blockade and contraband of war. But on this subject we have both probably read and thought so much as to have made up our minds, and it is not likely that either can make a convert of the other. With respect to the interests of the United States in this exuberant commerce which is now bringing war on us, we concur perfectly. It brings us into collision with other powers in every sea, and will force us into every war of the European powers. The converting this great agricultural country into a city of Amsterdam,—a mere head-quarters for carrying on the commerce of all nations with one another, is too absurd. Yet this is the real object of the drawback system,—it enriches a few individuals, but lessens the stock of native productions, by withdrawing from them all the hands thus employed; it is essentially interesting to us to have shipping and seamen enough to carry our surplus produce to market; but beyond that, I do not think we are bound to give it encouragement by drawbacks or other premiums. I wish you may be right

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in supposing that the trading States would now be willing to give up the drawbacks, and to denationalize all ships taking foreign articles on board for any other destination than the United States, on being secured

by discriminating duties, or otherwise in the exclusive carriage of the produce of the United States. I should doubt it. Were such a proposition to come *from them*, I presume it would meet with little difficulty. Otherwise, I suppose it must wait till peace, when the right of drawback will be less valued than the exclusive carriage of our own produce.

No apology was necessary for the letters you were so kind as to write me on this subject. I have always received with thankfulness the ideas of judicious persons on subjects interesting to the public. In the present case, I thought I should better fulfil your objects by communicating your letters to my successor, to whose views I have thought it my duty to give the lead, ever since his designation, as to all matters which he would have to execute. Nothing will probably be done on this subject in the few days between this and my retirement; and in that situation I shall certainly divorce myself from all part in political affairs. To get rid of them is the principal object of my retirement, and the first thing necessary to the happiness which, you justly observe, it is in vain to look for in any other situation. I pray you to accept my salutations, and assurances of respect.